

HOUSE RESOLUTION NO. 2001-4655, by Representatives Sump, Buck, Cairnes and B. Chandler

WHEREAS, The April 1999 general accounting office report entitled "Western National Forests, a Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats" states, "The most extensive and serious problem related to the health of national forests in the interior west is the overaccumulation of vegetation, which has caused an increasing number of large, intense, uncontrollable, and catastrophically destructive wildfires"; and

WHEREAS, The April 2000 United States forest service report entitled, "Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems: Cohesive Strategy" in response to the general accounting office report, confirmed the conclusion stated above and further warns, "Without increased restoration treatments. . . wildfire suppression costs, natural resource losses, private property losses, and environmental damage are certain to escalate as fuels continue to accumulate and more acres become high risk." The report also specifies that, at a low intensity, fire is ecologically beneficial, and has positive effects on biodiversity, soil productivity, and water quality; and

WHEREAS, The United States forest service further acknowledges that thirty-nine million acres of national forest are at significant risk of catastrophic wildfire and an additional twenty-six million acres will be at similar risk due to increases in the mortality of trees and brush caused by insects and disease; and

WHEREAS, The national research council and the federal emergency management agency recognized catastrophic wildfires such as those in California in 1993 and Florida in 1998 as among the defining natural disasters of the 1990s; and

WHEREAS, In Washington state, from 1990 to 1998, the state spent seventy-two million dollars to fight forest fires that destroyed nearly one hundred eighty-four thousand acres; and

WHEREAS, Catastrophic wildfires not only cause damage to the forests and other lands, but place the lives of fire fighters at risk and pose threats to human health, personal property, sustainable ecosystems, air, and water quality; and

WHEREAS, According to the national fire protection association, wildland-urban interface catastrophic wildfires from 1985 to 1994 destroyed nine thousand nine hundred twenty-five homes, and in 1999 alone burned six million acres of public lands nationwide, equivalent to a one and one-half mile-wide swath from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles and back; and

WHEREAS, The escaped Cerro Grande prescribed fire in May 2000, which consumed forty-eight thousand acres and destroyed four hundred homes with losses exceeding one billion dollars in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and the escaped Lowden prescribed fire in 1999 that destroyed twenty-three homes in Lewiston, California, highlight the unacceptable risks of using prescribed burning if, as reported, that burning was the sole forest management practice of federal land management agencies; and

WHEREAS, High-risk forest fuel has accumulated in combination with reduced fire response capability by federal agencies during the 1990s, resulting in catastrophic wildfires becoming more difficult

and expensive to extinguish with a disproportionate burden being placed on state and local resources, while the costs to fight these fires increased by one hundred fifty percent between 1986 and 1994, and the costs of maintaining a readiness force increased by seventy percent between 1992 and 1997; and

WHEREAS, Current planning efforts of the United States forest service such as the Sierra Nevada framework, Interior Columbia Basin ecosystem management project, the roadless initiative, and the federal monument proclamations rely primarily on extensive use of prescribed fire, which will further exacerbate the risk of catastrophic wildfire on federal lands throughout the west;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, That the House of Representatives recommend, in the interest of protecting the integrity and posterity of our forests and wildlands, wildlife habitat, watershed, air quality, human health and safety, and private property, the United States forest service and other federal land management agencies to immediately implement a cohesive strategy to reduce the overabundance of forest fuels that place these resources at high risk of catastrophic wildfire; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the House of Representatives recommend that the agencies use an appropriate mix of fire suppression activities and forest management methodologies, including selective thinning, selective harvesting, grazing, the removal of excessive ground fuels, and small-scale prescribed burns, including increased private, local, and state contracts for prefire-treatments on federal forest lands. More effective fire suppression in federal forest lands should be pursued through increased funding of mutual aid agreements with professional state and local public fire fighting agencies; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the House of Representatives recommend, in the interest of forest protection and rural community safety, the departments of agriculture and interior to immediately draft for public review and adoption a national prescribed fire strategy for public lands that creates a process for evaluation of worst case scenarios for risk of escape and identifies alternatives that will achieve the land management objectives while minimizing the risk and use of prescribed fire. This strategy should be incorporated into any regulatory land use planning programs that propose the use of prescribed fire as a management practice; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That copies of this resolution be immediately transmitted by the Co-Chief Clerks of the House of Representatives, to President George W. Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Interior, Gail Norton, Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Venneman, the Members of Congress from all of the western states, the United States Forest Service, the United States Park Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.

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